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ABSTRACT

An experimental design used to test the teachability of creative writing included pretesting and posttesting, control and experimental groups (composed of a total of 101 ninth grade students of average ability), and an intensive three-week teaching unit on creative writing. The treatment unit included extensive use of audiovisual materials and experimental programs. The compositions from pretesting and posttesting were rated by three judges, using a set of criteria and a rating scale drawn up by the researcher. The general hypothesis that creative writing can be enhanced by an intensive program or teaching unit was not supported by the data. (Author/RL)

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CAN CREATIVE WRITING BE TAUGHT?

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Can Creative Writing
Be Taught?

The study was designed to test the teachability of creative writing. The experimental design which was used included pre and post testing, control and experimental groups and an intensive teaching unit on creative writing. The treatment unit included extenstive use of audio-visual materials and experimental programs. Compositions were rated by three judges, who used a set of criteria and rating scale drawn up by the investigator. Pilot and main studies were run at the ninth grade level of three schools in southern Illinois. The general hypothesis that creative writing can be enhanced by an intensive program or teaching unit was not supported by the data.

Can Creative Writing Be Taught?

Is creative writing innate or can it be developed; is it a matter of "nature" or "nurture"? This question has been met with much speculation in the past, yet little controlled experimentation to date has been performed to test the "teachability" of creative writing.

With the recognition of the importance of communication through written expression have come increasing attempts among language arts teachers to encourage creative writing as well as to identify individuals who show talent in this respect (Burns and Lowe, 1966; Kinnick, 1968; Miller, 1962; Witty, 1956). Preliminary investigations indicate that the creative performance of all students - especially those with high creative potential, might be heightened by teacher behavior, deliberate training and group procedures (Dentler and Mackler, 1964; Hallman, 1967; Hutchinson, 1963; Maltzman, 1960; Rusch, Denny and Ives, 1951; Parnes, 1967; Zagona, Willis and MacKinnon, 1966).

In 1949, the Scottish Film Association sponsored an investigation by W. F. Lindsay, in which he tested whether films have an effect on writing factual and imaginative compositions. Children at the eleven-plus age level were matched on the I.Q. variable , while other differences remained uncontrolled. One group saw the

film only, another had a session without the film, and a third had both the film and lesson. No significant results were obtained, and Lindsay concluded that a student's vocabulary and flow of ideas cannot be improved and stimulated merely by seeing a film. If a subject does not have the necessary words to express ideas, no picture will suggest them.

Judithe Speidel (1969) performed a study using 6 classes of 148 sophomores taught by three teachers and divided into experimental and control groups. The experiment was designed to test the hypothesis that specificity in descriptive writing can be increased through perceptual training with visual materials. The teaching unit lasted 6 days. The study provided insufficient evidence in support of the hypothesis.

In actual classroom practice, teachers frequently use photographs or records to initiate sensory or memory writing as well as other modes of creative expression. Many teachers are so confident that creative writing can be enhanced by training that teaching units in creative writing with time spans of two to three weeks are quite common in schools all over the United States. This study has been designed to test whether confidence in such short units can be justified.

PROCEDURE

An experimental design including pre and post-testing, control and experimental groups and a teaching unit was used to test the general hypothesis that creative writing can be enhanced by the treatment of a teaching unit using audio-visual materials. During

the spring of 1974, pilot and main studies were run at the ninth grade level of three schools in southern Illinois.

Pre and post-testing included the Torrance Test in Creative Thinking (forms A and B), the writing of four compositions (two pre and two post) and self, teacher and peer ratings of creative drawing and writing. A five-point scale from very low to very high was used in the creativity ratings as well as in the judging of the compositions.

Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted at Carterville High School, Carterville, Illinois. It was run in order to uncover any unforseen problems that might occur in the main study. The two ninth grade English classes that were utilized had already been in session throughout the year. The sample numbered 55 subjects (28 experimental and 27 control) taught by the same English teacher. Of this number, 21 were male and 34 were female. The experimental group was administered a one-week teaching unit (5 class periods of 50 minutes each) while the control group attended regular English classes.

Results of the pilot study indicated a need to shorten the length of the tapes used during pre and post-test composition writing. Another required change was a modification in the directions stated on the composition booklets. Findings showed that a one-week unit in creative writing did not significantly

improve the creative writing abilities of the students.

Main Study

The main study was made up of 101 ninth grade average ability students in four English classes of two schools. Two of the classes were located at Murphysboro, Illinois and two were at West Frankfort High School, West Frankfort, Illinois. The two English teachers in charge of the four classes taught the three-week training unit for the two experimental groups. One of the two classes taught by each teacher was randomly chosen to be the experimental group - the remaining class becoming the control group. There were 53 students in the experimental groups and 48 in the control groups. Table I shows distribution by sex for the four groups involved. Figure 1 illustrates an outline of the experimental design of the main study.

Prior to pre-testing, seven students were randomly chosen from the experimental groups of the two schools. They were interviewed in a follow-up study after all post-testing was completed. This was done in order to gauge the reactions of the subjects to the experimental program they had just experienced.

During pre-testing, composition 1 was written in reaction to two short films: Rainshower and Ways to find Out. These films were chosen because of similarity of subject matter, length and appeal to the senses. Each class was divided in half, with one

TABLE I

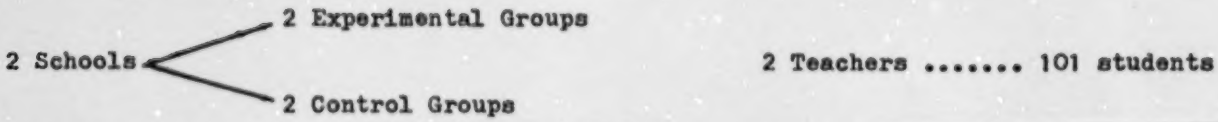
SEX AND NUMBER DISTRIBUTION OF
MAIN STUDY SAMPLE

	Murphysboro		West Frankfort		
Sex	Experimental	Control	Experimental	Control	Total
Male	15	10	15	21	61
Female	11	11	12	6	40
Totals	26	21	27	27	101

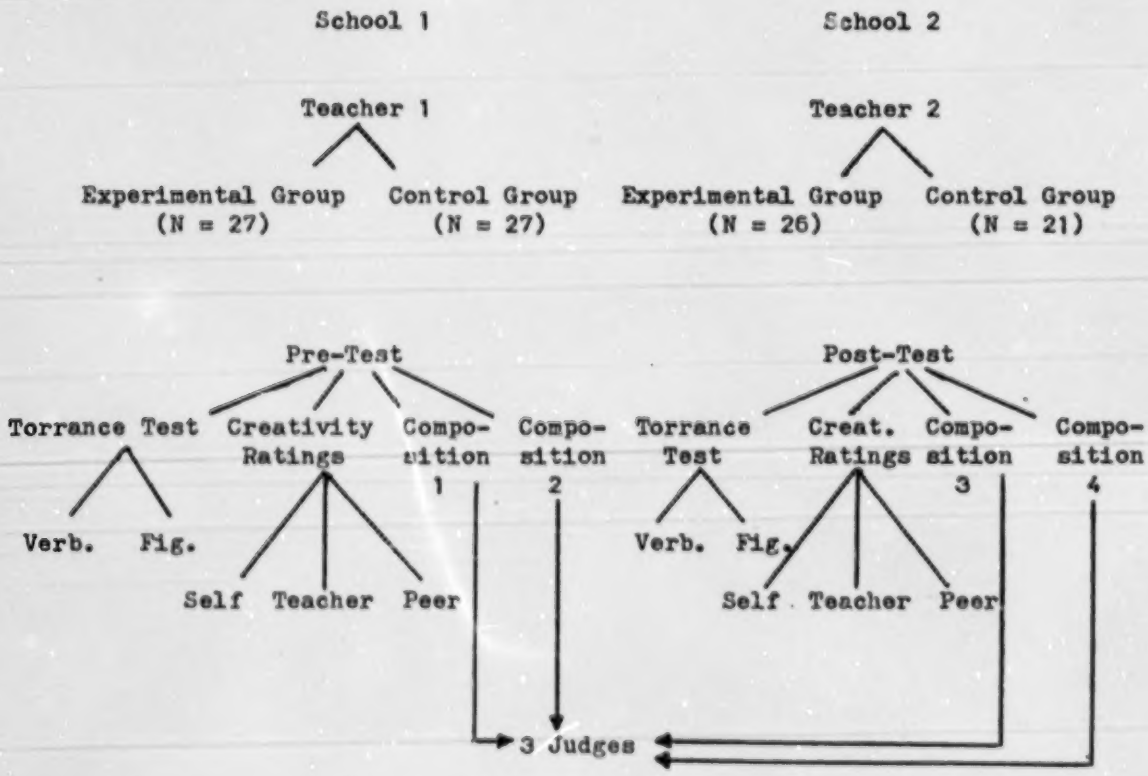
Figure 1

Experiment in Creative Writing

Experimental Design



Teaching Unit: Three Weeks for Experimental Group Only.



half responding to one film and the other half responding to the other film. The same two stimuli were used for post-testing.

The films were switched in order that each half view a different film. The division of each class was done to prevent the judges from determining which compositions were pre and which were post-test products by reading the subject matter of the compositions.

The second composition was written in response to a slide (either an abstract cartoon by Saul Steinberg or a matched drawing by Carolyn Weiss, Southern Illinois University cartographer (see figures 2 and 3) and a tape recording (one of two matched tapes) featuring currently popular rock music and sound effects. Again, classes were split into halves, with one half experiencing one slide and tape and the other half responding to the remaining slide and tape. Post-testing repeated the use of the same stimuli. But, at this time, the stimuli were again switched so that each "class half" responded to a slide and tape different from the ones it has responded to during pre-testing. Each composition was given a time limit of 50 minutes. Students chose writing topics suggested to them during exposure to the stimuli.

A three-week teaching unit followed pre-testing. The control group attended regular classes and did not receive

Figures 2 and 3 were removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 2

Saul Steinberg Cartoon Stimulus for Two (Pre and Post-Test) Compositions. See Figure 3 for Matched Drawing.*

Figure 3

Cartoon Drawn by Carolyn Weiss, Southern Illinois University Cartographer and Used as Stimulus for Two (Pre and Post-Test) Compositions. See Figure 2 for matched drawing.

* Permission request for reproduction has been sent to Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. . Cartoon published in Steinberg, Saul The New World. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. .

instruction in creative writing. Control group instruction included such materials and activities as library research, class presentations, reading of the novel Pigman, a grammar unit and a composition unit covering "The Structure of the Paragraph."

The instructional unit for the experimental group included such materials and activities as the showing of seven films, in-class writing stimulated by the use of the senses, examination of creative and non-creative writing products of high school students, drawing in combination with writing, slides of cartoons for students to caption, exercises in the use simile and metaphor, and exercises in Synectics, Inc.: Making it Strange: A New Design For Creative Thinking and Writing.

Three judges were chosen to rate all compositions on a five-point scale. These judges had been previously tested for their ability to distinguish creative responses from the non-creative through the use of the grading manual of Guilford's Plot Titles Test. A practice rating session was then held on 20 preliminary compositions. Each judge made use of a hand-out on the rating criteria, criteria definitions and an explanation of the five-point rating scale. A discussion followed, which covered such questions as "How should we grade a plot that has obviously been taken from a television show?" and "What sort of grade should a composition receive if it is inconsistent in quality?"

Copies were made of the 412 compositions and each judge rated all compositions. Every 25th composition was reviewed during the rating sessions in order to promote inter-rater consistency. If wide discrepancies were found, a discussion ensued as to the reasons for such disagreements. The compositions were scored on originality, idea production, language usage and uniqueness of style. The score for each criteria was an average of the ratings of all three judges. Each composition also received a total score - derived by combining the averages for all four criteria.

An analysis of covariance program was run on the total sample of the main study. Means, standard deviations, correlations among 50 variables, F-ratios and directional and non-directional probability were derived from the data. The main object was to find whether any significant differences existed between experimental and control groups during post-testing as a result of the teaching unit on creative writing. The covariates of the program were sex, school and I.Q.. The .05 level was chosen as the test of significance.

Results

Significant differences ($p < .05$) in favor of the experimental group did occur in post-testing. These included Torrance Test verbal fluency ($p = .0106$) and flexibility ($p = .0015$). Other differences such as self-rating writing ($p = .1191$) and

TABLE II

MAIN STUDY PROBABILITIES

Variable	Non-Directional Pre-Test	Directional Post-Test
Self-Rating (Writing)	1.000	.119+
" " (Drawing)	.087	.643
Teacher-Rating	.688	.0002*
Peer-Rating (Writing)	.727	.636
" " (Drawing)	.735	.364
Fluency (Verbal)	.162	.0106*
Flexibility (Verbal)	.146	.0015*
Originality (Verbal)	.222	.219
Title Originality (Verbal)	.675	.171
Fluency (Figural)	.872	.334
Flexibility (Figural)	.766	.756
Originality (Figural)	.941	.706
Elaboration (Figural)	.813	.339
Originality (Films)	.882	.582
Prod. of Ideas (Films)	.967	.613
Exp. of Lang. (Films)	.964	.815
Uniq. of Style (Films)	.922	.704
Total (Films)	.952	.678
Orig. (Slides and Tapes)	.864	.099+
Prod. Ideas (Slides & Tapes)	.661	.328
Ex. of Lang. "	.494	.488
Uniq. of Style "	.434	.227
Total (Slides and Tapes)	.607	.257

*Significant at the .05 level +In desired direction

the originality of composition 4 (p = .0892) were in the desired direction. The rest of the post-test differences did not favor either control or experimental groups to any large extent (see Table II). These positive results, however, are so few that they could have happened by chance. Thus, it would seem that the hypothesis that a three-week teaching unit on creative writing would improve the creative writing abilities of the students can not be supported.

In relation to the ratings on creative ability, females were usually rated higher than were the males, and the control group scored higher on most pre and post-test rationgs than did the experimental group. Students tended to rate each other quite similarly on both creative writing and drawing. The r's ranged from .86 to .92. Both peer-ratings of writing and drawing correlated from .40 to .49 with many composition criteria scores. In connection with the Torrance Test scores, very few of the self and peer-ratings correlated higher than .40.

When comparing the creativity ratings (self, teacher and peer) in relation to actual creative performance, the correlations indicate that teachers were better predictors of title originality scores of the pre-test. However, peer creativity ratings were by far the best predictors of creative writing performance on both pre and post-test compositions. Self-ratings ranked a distant second and teacher-ratings posted only three correlations above .40 with composition scores.

With the exception of title originality, the scores on the verbal section of the Torrance Test (both pre and post-test) showed from moderate to high inter-correlations (r's from .48 to .80). Title originality, on the other hand, achieved higher correlations with composition scores. It was also more successful than other verbal Torrance Test scores in predicting creativity ratings (r's from .41 to .55).

Figural pre-test scores intercorrelated at .49 to.73. But, they did not correlate greater than .40 with pre-test verbal scores. The highest r's achieved by figural post-test scores were the intercorrelations of scores within their own battery (r's from .40 to .66).

In viewing composition score correlations, it was found that criteria scores for composition 1 achieved high inter-correlations (r's from .84 to .96). These variables also correlated from .40 to .49 with criteria for composition 3; this is not surprising, since both compositions were written in response to the same stimuli (films).

Scores for composition 2 also posted high correlations with other scores on the same composition (.86 to .96). These variables posted moderately high correlations (.55 to .63) with scores on composition 4 - both compositions having been written in response to slides and tapes. Post-test conpositions 3 and 4 also achieved highest correlations when their criteria scores were intercorrelated (r's from .83 to .96).

Results of the post-experiment interviews showed Why Man Creates to be the most popular film used in the study. The film pointed out as being least popular was Creativity, by the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Two other films shown to be well liked were Rainshower and The Searching Eye. Views on the activities used during the teaching unit reflected individual tastes, which varied greatly.

Responses in the evaluation of the teaching unit as a whole, were quite favorable, although suspicions of anything associated with "English" still run deep among students who harbor a dislike for it as a required subject in the American school system. When asked whether they preferred a text-book grammatical approach or a creative writing framework in the teaching of composition, the opinions were unanimous in favor of the latter.

It is quite possible that more significant results could be achieved if the study were repeated using high ability students rather than those of average ability, as was the case in this study. The author strongly suspects that cultural factors are also present (especially at the average and low ability levels) which interfere with a true measure of creative writing performance, since it appears that boys often consider it effeminate to display talents in this direction. Another problem encountered using low to average ability subjects is that many of such students seem to be lacking in facility of language usage and expression and do not often possess an adequate vocabulary with

which to write. In other words, a replication of the study using only high ability students might have achieved more positive results.

In the final analysis, it does not seem likely that creative writing can be significantly enhanced through the use of one to three-week units in creative writing. It is, however, possible that greater significance in the desired direction might be achieved if the teaching units were extended to encompass the length of a semester or perhaps even a year.

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